

Conservatives Can Learn From Rob Portman

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Senator Rob Portman's (R-OH) decision to support marriage equality highlights the absurdity of his previous position. Portman, who was a social conservative but whose positions have evolved since learning a few years ago that his son is gay, clearly believes that his love for his son is more important than holding on to bigoted views. This is obviously a wise and laudable decision, but it also raises questions about his previously bigoted position.

If Portman genuinely believed that same-sex couples should not be equal before the law or that being gay was somehow wrong, it would have not been so easy to change these views, in spite of both his son and the evolving political consensus on these questions. If seeing that somebody he loved would be treated unfairly due to his positions was enough to facilitate a change of view by a senator, then Portman, like many conservatives, is guilty of an astonishing lack of empathy. Did he not realize that the sons and daughters of many of his constituents, who are indeed also loved by their parents no less than Portman loves his own son, had been treated unfairly due to the laws that he had supported? Moreover, is it really possible that Portman never had gay colleagues or friends before his son came out?

Perhaps learning that his son is gay forced Portman to rethink his views about gay people, leading him to question things that in the back, or front, of his mind he had believed: that being gay is a lifestyle choice, that gay people are unfit to raise children or that they are not capable of establishing enduring loving relationships. However, believing these things today can only be the product of a mind that is deliberately closed to the mountains of scientific, personal and anecdotal evidence around us. In fairness to Portman, and conservatives generally, many progressives had also been notably silent on marriage equality until very recently.

One possible and relatively simple explanation for Portman's change of heart on marriage equality is that he never held those views very strongly in the first place, but thought that they were necessary to get through a Republican primary and have a successful career in electoral politics. Portman's views may not be based on reflection, religious views or anything of that nature, but on political expedience. If that is the case, then it is easy to understand how those views were jettisoned once Portman learned about his son.

Portman is just one senator, and almost all Republican elected officials continue to oppose marriage equality. However, the relatively small amount of backlash from the Republican Party suggests that the cost of switching views on marriage equality may not be very high for Republicans, particularly those who, like Portman, do not represent deeply red states or districts. It is likely that Portman, whose name was floated as a possible running mate for Mitt Romney in 2012, but who may have not been offered a spot on that ticket because his son is gay, will be in an even stronger position to be on a national ticket in 2016 precisely because of his position on marriage equality. That is, of course, assuming the Republican Party is interested in winning in 2016, rather than simply having a year-long audition for programs on Fox News and Tea Party speaking gigs in the future.

Portman's announcement came the same week as former Secretary of State, and likely 2016 presidential candidate, Hillary Clinton announced her support for marriage equality. The contrast between Portman and Clinton, and their parties, on this issue was extremely stark. Clinton's announcement received very little fanfare as it is now expected that Democratic lawmakers and candidates support marriage equality. By publicly taking this position, Clinton helped her potential candidacy and stoked the perception that she will seek the presidency in 2016.

Over the next months and years, Portman could provide an important lesson to Republicans: that supporting marriage equality does not mean the end of his political career, or he could lose to a radical social conservative in his next primary. To the extent there still is a national Republican Party, they would be well served to make sure the latter possibility does not happen as it would force the Republicans into not wavering from what is already a losing position.

The lack of criticism Portman has received for his change of position suggests that most Republicans are at least willing to give him a pass on this because of the personal nature of his decision. While this may, on the surface, seem generous, it also further confirms that for many Republicans opposing LGBT rights is not the moral absolute they suggest, but a politically expedient choice.